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LOST LEGENDS OF ISRAEL

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Of God, the Devil and the Jews

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LOST LEGENDS OF ISRAEL

BY

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A WORD TO THE READER

HE TALES in this small book unfold from many sources. Some are memories from my childhood when I sat by the desk of my saintly grandfather, a devout follower of Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name. Others were heard from the lips of my people on three different continents, little people, to be sure, but people with big hearts and great resolution. And some are just daydreams I have lived through while scanning the pages of Israel's memorable history, pages that lay forgotten in little *shuls,* in little libraries.

I do not know by what criterion to judge these tales. I have tried to recall them the way they touched me as expressions of man's search for the supernatural, for the ethical, for the divine, for the profound, and for the national. There is a nationalism that is like a thorn hurting those that come near it, but there is also a nationalism

that is like a balm, soothing and full of assurance. It is the goodness speaking out of these tales that touched me so deeply, and I hope that you, too, will feel their gentle blessing.

Listening to people of simple faith, one feels the impact and the depth of their religion. You see the Law and the customs, the Torah and the *minhagdim* come to life again in the hearts of the believing. To them, believing is to be living their generous heritage, and in their small everyday observances they relive the grandeur of their past.

I hope it will give you, my dear readers, as much pleasure to listen to these tales of the simple people as it has given me to set them down for you.

THE CANDLES OF THE LORD

HEN I WAS a little boy in Zastavna in Romania, I was given to a tutor for the study of Hebrew and of what was euphemistically called Judaism. My tutor was a sweet little old man who believed in the letter of the Law and the ubiquity of the Lord. When he appealed to the Lord, as the men of the village often did, one almost had the feeling that He was sitting at the end of the living room, attentively watching our Mr. Braver.

One day I arrived unexpectedly at his little study room, and as usual I found him seated at the great barren table, pondering Holy Writ. But it was not Holy Writ, as I was soon to find out.

"Why are the candles lit, Mr. Braver?" I asked. "It is not Friday evening and the sun is far from down."

He motioned to me with a finger at his lips to

keep quiet, and then whispered, "I'm reading Spinoza."

It was many years before what then appeared an unresponsive reply made sense to me. The writings of the great seventeenth century philosopher were anathema to the heart of his own people.

At that time, however, I only asked another question: "Why do we Jews light candles on holy days?"

Mr. Braver leaned back thoughtfully. "Thousands of years ago," he began, "the armies of the Roman Caesars ransacked all the western world. They destroyed Carthage, they conquered Athens and Alexandria and many others of the great centers of learning, and soon brought their armies into Israel in an attempt to break the spirit and faith of our people.

"But the people revolted. Waiting for the right moment, the Roman general Titus surrounded the holy city of Jerusalem and put a million of its people, who had assembled for the holy days, under siege. For two years the beleaguered population fought, until disease and starvation had taken such a heavy toll that resistance finally collapsed. Street by street and house by house, men and boys defended their city. The few surviving soldiers of Israel, under the leadership of

General Eliezer, made a last stand before the tabernacle in the great Temple. Most of them were suffering from severe wounds, yet still they fought.

"It is said that Titus, standing before the few desperate men, called to Eliezer, 'Why don't you drop your sword? Your God is vanquished and so are your people. They will be dispersed to all the four corners of the world. This is the end of your nation. Throw yourself on the mercy of imperial Rome!'

"But Eliezer raised himself to his full height and ripped from the stand a broken menorah on which only two stems remained, and, with all his strength, shouted, 'As long as these two candles burn, there will be an Israel!'

"So you see, my boy," said Mr. Braver, "that's why every Friday evening we Jews light two candles, wherever we may be. In the blackness of a Siberian forest or in the mansions of New York, in the markets of Honk Kong or in the service of foreign armies, we are still one nation, one people."

With a sly wink, he added, "Whenever I read a sophisticate, I light my two candles. I want the good Lord to know that I haven't forgotten Him —that I'm still on His side."

THE MAN WITH HALF A FACE

N THE DAYS of the great Exodus, when the sons of Israel traversed the deserts between Egypt and Canaan in flight from the ruthless armies of Pharaoh, there was among the wanderers a man by the name of Ahab. Ahab was a peculiar sort; he refused to speak the language of his people, but conversed with his tent neighbors, his young son, and even with the elders, in the Egyptian tongue.

He was of the grumbling kind—impatient, sulky, and full of complaints. To himself he often said, "What am I doing here, among these dull runaway slaves and their ragged families, who take after their mad Prince Moses like a flock of sheep?"

Now Ahab was not the only one yearning for the fleshpots of Egypt; many seemed to have forgotten that in Egypt their food had been given them not in the freedom of their own homes, but

in the slave stables.

Ahab had a particular grievance. He had been an officer in Pharaoh's army of slave drivers. He wore the Pharaoh's signet on a metal band around his right forearm, and during all the years of travel with his kinsmen never once took it off.

One evening he sat brooding outside his tent, and said to his son: "We don't belong here, my boy. We are not like them. We have nothing in common with the sons of Jacob. We are Egyptians." In this manner he talked deep into the night.

Early in the morning Ahab brought his son before the elders and said: "I am leaving you as of this hour. I am going back to Mizraim, where I shall no longer be an animal in flight like you. I shall be a man again."

In vain did the elders try to dissuade him with appeals to his sense of duty to his tribe and to Israel. At length one stopped Ahab short and said, "If you join them, they will disavow you. If you share their dwellings, they will mark you out. If you take their privileges, they will disdain you. And when danger arises, they will desert you.

"You can never be like them, because you are not. Between you and them flows the blood of your people spent by their pagan swords. You cannot run from your own and save your face.

With them you will have to live with only half a face."

The next morning the tent of Ahab was empty. With his son, he had gone west toward the Nile. For many days the two traveled, until one evening they reached the borders of the land of the pyramids. As Ahab and his son set foot on the soil of Egypt, he looked boldly at the military guards and said, "I am Ahab, an Egyptian, and I am returning to my home."

No sooner had he spoken these words than the guards shrieked, dropped their arms, and ran off wildly into the desert. Ahab's son fell to the ground, sobbing bitterly. For Ahab now had only half a face—half a nose, half of his lips, half a chin, and but one ear and one eye.

Ahab realized that the warning of the elders had become his curse. He left his son on the road, and made his way alone to the Nile. There, on the bank of the river he found an isolated cove, where he built himself a mud hut. He made nets and traps to catch fish and shell creatures, which he sold to villagers nearby. They left their payment on the rocks where he deposited his catch, for they did not dare look upon his half-face. Years went by; Ahab grew old, the bitterness deepened in his heart and solitude weighed heavily on his soul. Yet still did his right arm bear the

metal band with the signet of the Pharaoh.

One evening he sat on the river bank looking toward the horizon where the moon seemed almost to touch the waters and the stars were so close that they appeared to blink from his breath. Ahab's sadness grew, and he felt that his heart would burst. As in a dream, he entered his hut, took some women's clothing he had hidden in a chest, and wrapped linen around his head as women do when going to the marketplace.

He walked many miles, until he came to the city of Thebes, where dwelt the Pharaoh. It was already morning when he reached the palace walls. Near the main gate he became aware of a tumult—Pharaoh's guards were dragging a bleeding man toward the gate. Ahab recognized this man as a Jew by the shape of his beard and the cut of his clothing. With a sudden impulse, he ran across the grounds swinging his staff; but before he could strike any of the soldiers, one sent a spear through his chest. As he fell, the linen covering his head unraveled, and he lay on the ground in agony.

When the captain of the guard bent over the dying man, Ahab looked up and murmured, "My son, my son!"

The captain looked at the metal band and at the face of the old man, and cried out, "You

have your whole face again, my father!" "My son," Ahab said, "the flesh is weak and the spirit is like the wind. Take me back to the land of my people, so that my soul may find its peace. I wish I could have written into my heart the words of Prince Moses, 'And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.' And I wish I could have written on my forehead the other words: 'I am the Lord thy God who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' "

So Ahab died, and his son doffed the vestments of his high station and prepared to set out upon the road to Canaan. He had his father's body embalmed, as was the ancient custom, and placed it on the back of a donkey. He took two pieces of bark, on which were carved the last words of his dying father, and bound one with leather thongs to the left arm of the dead man, close to his heart, and the other to his forehead. He called these *tefillin,* which means in Egyptian, "prayers" or "divine songs." As he kneeled at the body of his father he tried to remember the prayers of old, but all that came to his mind were the last words of the mourning services: *Yisgadal veyiskadash . . .*

So it came to pass that Ahab's son reached his people in the land of Canaan. Prince Moses had long since passed on, but Joshua listened to the

woeful story of the life of Ahab, and was deeply moved. To all the tribes and their elders he sent a message:

"The story of Ahab is the story of Israel. Let every son and every father and every elder—let every priest and judge and soldier—tie the bark with the words of the Lord to his heart and to his forehead in the manner of Ahab. And let each recite his prayers each morning under the weight of this admonition. And every man who dies, may his son stand at his grave or in the house of worship, and, as the sun rises, let him recite, for eleven months and a day, the blessings of Ahab's son, *Yisgadal veyiskadash . . .*"

So it came about, so it is to this very day, and so shall it be for all time to come.

A QUESTION OF IMPORTANCE

HOUSANDS of years ago, when Joshua wielded the sword of Israel to defend his people from the constant pagan attacks, there dwelt in one of his camps a young woman by the name of Rachel. She was an artist skilled in ornamenting banners and other warrior's gear.

One day Rachel fashioned a battle vest that was inlaid with magnificent and meaningful writings. To each of the vest's four corners she attached a tassel with seven silver threads, one for each day of the week. Her friends gathered round to admire this beautiful vestment and to wonder what lucky soldier would receive it.

Some thought she should give it to her young man, Nahum, who had just joined the forces of Joshua.

"What do you call this piece of cloth?" they asked.

"I don't know," Rachel replied. "Perhaps it should be called a *tallit,* a prayer shawl, because the symbols I have sewn with my threads are all reminders of prayers."

Someone else suggested calling it *tzitzit*—"tassels"—because the silver tassels appeared so prominent and unusual.

Then Rachel said, "Let us call it *arba kanfot,* because that is actually what it is—a cloth with four corners, which, because of its richness and beauty, and because it is a symbol of our Torah, I should like to give to the most important person among our people."

Rachel wrapped the *arba kanfot* carefully in linen and bore it off to the man she considered the most important—the high priest of the nation.

For many days she waited outside the tabernacle. Finally she was granted a brief audience with the high priest. He looked at the brilliant *tallit* and said, "My vestments are prescribed by law—I will not, I cannot change them."

So Rachel sought out the chief judge. He also admired the garment, but said, "So rich a garment is fit only for the leader of our troops himself, not to cover the doubting bosom of a judge of the people."

For many weeks Rachel wandered the dusty paths of Canaan until she found the tent of

Joshua. Even in the dim light of the tent the leader looked with wonderment upon the precious gift.

"You seek the most important man in Israel," he said. "Our fighting men are important, yes, but the most important? Not I." He led her to the entrance of his tent and pointed to a far hill that stood out against the blue of the night. It was a cold night and fires were burning throughout the camp. "There he is!"

"You see," said Joshua, "on the rim of that hill stands a son of our people surrounded by the cold darkness of the night. He keeps watch so that we may rest; he stands guard so that we may be warm. Give your *tallit* to that young man. He is the most important of us all."

With slow and hesitant step Rachel climbed the hill and silently placed the vestment at the feet of the young soldier. Then she looked up. It was Nahum, her young man from the village.

The story spread through the camp and from the camp to all the people of Israel, and from that day on every man and boy, every soldier and traveler, puts on a cloth of four corners with a tassel on each corner. For he too wants to be a watchman for his people.

THE GREATER SKILL

LMOST forgotten is the tale of King David and the two horse trainers. The king did not know which trainer to hire for an important war that threatened. At last he asked each of the men to bring before him six of his best horses.

The first trainer, who was named Abu, led in six remarkable animals. One horse stood on his hind legs for as long as it would take to recite the Commandments. Another stood on his forelegs and jumped. A third horse could dance; a fourth could swim like a fish; and a fifth could carry the load of a camel; and the sixth horse could run as fast backwards as forwards.

The king watched the performances with astonishment. Then he summoned the second trainer, who presented his team of six stallions, each of which looked pretty much like the other —clean, trim, and well-groomed.

"What can they do?" asked the king.

"Nothing, Sire," said the trainer, "that any other good horse could not do, only mine do it well and do it steadily."

"You are my man," said King David. "I need horses to carry my men into battle, not into a circus ring."

HOW TO CHOOSE A KING

HEN KING DAVID was old and ailing and felt the end of his earthly days near, he called in his oldest son, Adonijah, and his youngest son, Solomon, and set before them two small tables. On one lay a large ruby, red and glittering. Next to it was a sword, its sharp edge biting into the air. And next thereto rested a crown of gleaming gold. On the other table were a loaf of bread, a cane, and a peasant's cap.

"My sons," said King David, "look upon these tables and choose. My eyes are getting dim and from afar I hear the voices of my ancestors. I will speak my decision as the voices will it, not giving in to my favor, but to my duty as the last in their line."

Adonijah took a step forward and spoke:

"My king and father, I take this crown, being your eldest son and the first prince of your house. I take this ruby to grace your court, and I take

this sword to defend your land."

Adonijah stood silent, and King David turned to his youngest son.

"What say you, Solomon?"

The boy drew closer to his father.

"I wish for no crown but on your head," he whispered. "I wish for no sword but in your hands, because you, my lord, have transmuted Israel from a shambles into a glory. I wish for no ruby but in your crown."

King David slowly shook his head, but, in a trembling voice, young Solomon continued:

"I take the peasant's cap, because a man is better than a king. A king is anointed with precious oils as a symbol of ordained dominion. A king is like a marble pillar upon which rests the firmament of a nation, but a man is like water in the nearby brook, simple and good for every day. And when troubles beset you, when your heart is ill and your mind a burden, you want a man and not a monarch.

"I want the bread and not the ruby. A ruby is beautiful to behold, but beauty is tiresome, while bread is the staff of life.

"I want the stick and not the sword. The sword will conquer enemies, but a cane will help you walk when your legs have grown brittle."

Then Solomon, too, stood silent.

King David removed the great seal ring from his finger and gave it to Solomon.

"Take this, my defender of peace, and hold together our people with the same wisdom your young lips have spoken."

Thus did Solomon become King of Israel.

THE BOOK OF LIFE

EGEND has it that in the years of Solomon, King of Israel, there lived in the hills north of Jerusalem a shepherd who was rumored to have some rare and valuable parchments hidden in a secluded cave. In those days parchments were few, aside from those in the archives of the king or in the custody of the priest. It is little wonder, therefore, that when word of this unusual shepherd finally reached the King of Israel he dispatched a messenger to summon him forthwith. The King commanded him to bring along his rare scrolls so that the scholars of Jerusalem might examine them.

Within a fortnight the shepherd arrived, bearing on his shoulders a heavy urn. He set this before the king, removed the parchments, and began to spread them out one by one.

"Why, there is nothing on them!" exclaimed the King's scribes. "Nothing but the names of a

few fishermen, shepherds, farmers, traveling merchants—and folk of that sort!"

"That is all they are, to be sure, my King," said the shepherd, "to you and to everybody else. But to me each of them is a page in my life. When I win a friend, I set a page aside for him in my book of life, and I try to fill it with words of kindness and with deeds of friendship. And when my friend passes away or deserts me, a page is torn from my life."

"You have here a great treasure indeed," said the king. "I would gladly give up many of my treasure rooms and storehouses for a few of your leaves of friendship."

THE SIGNS AND PORTENTS OF ELIJAH

N THE CENTURY after the great King Solomon, when the people of Israel broke up into two separate kingdoms and warred against each other, there arose in the kingdom of Judea a strong and unusual man. He was a hermit who lived in the hills of Golos with only a few friends to share his loneliness. He walked about barefoot, with a skin around his loins and a skin cap as his headgear. His name was Elijah.

In Elijah's time there reigned in Judea King Ahab, who had married Jezebel, princess of Tyre. The princess may have loved the king, but she did not love his people, and she used many a wile and much of her womanly power to divert the king away from his subjects and the people from the true God of Israel. Those who did not follow her wanton wishes, either by deed or by pretense, were scourged by her henchmen and suffered a life of misery.

Legend has it that every so often, when the need was great and danger was at the door, Elijah would appear out of nowhere, tall as Samson and equal to him in courage.

Who does not know the story of the widow Chanah in the village of Aben, who refused to stray from the path of righteousness? The king's tax collectors came, and when she could not pay the levies they demanded—for she had neither gold nor cattle nor other property—they ripped one of the four wooden posts from her hut and carried it away.

On that day Elijah appeared in the village of Aben and walked slowly to the widow's house. Bracing himself, he raised his right arm and straightened the sagging roof. There he remained standing, without saying a word.

Hour after hour went by, and the people came from the whole countryside to observe the strange spectacle. By the next morning there sat a thousand people, silently, at the feet of Elijah, when, lo and behold, the king himself rode up in his chariot, and his henchmen brought back the post which they had stolen from the widow's home.

Then King Ahab said to Elijah: "If you are the true prophet, let me see your Lord light your altar in competition with my priest of Baal."

In the face of all those present who had come

from near and far, the pagan priest first set forth and made an altar of two stones. He placed on it the animal of sacrifice and sang out his prayers to the East, and to the West, and even to the black demon below, but the stones remained cold.

Then Elijah stood up and walked to the nearby hill and broke off rock after rock.

King Ahab said, "Stop there! Two is enough!"

But Elijah answered, "The Lord wants all twelve, one for each of our tribes; two are merely dumb stones, but twelve rocks make a people."

When his twelve rocks were set in place and the animal had been sacrificed, Elijah poured water over the altar with the words, "No wind or water will stop the flame that the Lord has kindled in the heart of His people." Then he raised his arms to the heavens, and a lightning flame consumed the sacrifice.

Again, it is told that King Ahab invited the prophet to his palace. But when he arrived at the gate, the king's guards ordered him to remove his head-covering. Elijah refused to do so. When he was brought before the king, the guards again insisted strongly that he remove it. But Elijah said, "As long as there is one son of Israel in bondage or in exile, I shall remove my head-covering before neither priest nor king."

From that day on, the people of Judea and all

the children of Israel have kept their heads covered—as a symbol of defiance toward oppressors of all lands—when they are at work, at rest, or at prayer.

When the prophet arrived at the palace, the king was feeding his falcons. At that moment a flock of ravens approached the feeding place, and Ahab's men tried to drive them off. When Elijah remonstrated, the king remarked, "Why feed them? They are ugly and of no use to me."

And Elijah said, "Does a father feed only his handsome daughter or his clever son?"

It is told further that one day the prophet wandered into the desert, as was his habit, and was lost for seven days and seven nights. In vain did he look for food and drink. Suddenly a great swarm of ravens came flying from high above the clouds, carrying in their beaks rare fruits from distant lands. Speaking of this to his followers in later years, Elijah said, "How useful may those be whom we often consider worthless!"

King Ahab was much taken by the prophet, but to the queen the wild man of Golos was a thorn in the side. When Jezebel heard of his rising power, she sent men to apprehend him. As he had done many times before, Elijah had assembled a large group of followers in the silence of the forest, and was speaking to them of the ancient

heritage they shared and of the duties that were theirs to uphold. It was a moonlit night, and suddenly the men around Elijah saw a strong company of the queen's soldiers approaching. The prophet's men were themselves considerable in number, but they were armed with nothing but their walking staffs.

Legend has it that Elijah raised his eyes to the brilliant sky and breathed the words, "I wish I had the arms of King David to fight the evil that is upon us."

Straightaway a rain of stars fell from the sky, and a star lit on the end of each man's staff. When the queen's soldiers saw the ranks of glittering spears, they fled in terror; and from that day on the star of David has never left the banner of Israel.

THE LAND OF THE GOLDEN MIRRORS

HE GOOD BOOK tells us of the times when the earth was young and the people were few. It speaks of days and weeks, but in the eyes of the Lord a day is like a thousand years.

Not always did the people of the Book live with it. When they were in exile or in enslavement, the Law and the lore of ancient days passed from the aged to the young and grew with them, until the young themselves became sage and reminiscent, and so lived by the Book long after scroll and tablet had themselves been deserted. When the exiled returned, when the enslaved broke their chains and faced the ancient scrolls again, it was as though the past had been but a fleeting dream.

The stories of remembrance spun by the isolated, no matter how thin their thread, carried the spirit that held together a people in despair. Deep in the desert hills of Arabia a word from the

Book grew into pages of worship and adoration:

When the earth was young it was a land of darkness. Every man groped about for himself; his world was without color and thought, and he lived in fear of the beasts and in want of a friend.

But the story goes that of all the men who crawled on the ground there was one who raised himself to the sky, like a tree, and shouted to the heavens above, "I am Adam, the upright one! Show me Thy face, my Lord! I want to see! I want to see!"

The Lord hearkened and said to Adam, "I shall make you upright, and upright shall be your people."

As the story continues, the Lord reached out with His right hand into the vastness of the heavens, until His finger touched the sun of suns at the end of time. He broke that sun into a thousand crystals that floated through the sky and down to the ground. The earth was lit up by the stars and by its own sun and moon, and man raised his head and walked in their light and kept his eyes fastened on the realm of the Lord.

The voice of the Creator was heard from end to end: "At the feet of every one of you I have placed a mirror of my sun. I shall see you when your face is upon it, and you shall see Me when the light of the sun is in your heart. You shall

think of Me with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your might. I shall be with you when you wander; I shall be with you when you are resting. And I shall remind you that you are sons of darkness by blotting out the sun and making day into night; and I shall remind you that you are Mine forever, and that to the land of darkness you must return when your journey is finished. I shall remind you of the heaven below and the heaven above by borrowing your soul, every day of the seven, from nightfall to the rising of the sun."

"You can live in My light and you can live in darkness; the mirror is in your hand. Let your mirror tell you what your face bespeaks. Look around yourself and look beyond yourself. All those who walk like you, they are like you. Deem them as your own, and love them as your own, as I love you as My own."

The story goes that for a thousand years man lived in the light of the Lord, and that some day there will be found many scrolls to tell wondersome tales of the first day of creation, which in the eyes of the Lord was a thousand years.

What has become of the Land of the Golden Mirrors we do not know. We do know that somewhere, in a shepherd's hut on a hill, or in a grimy fisherman's boat, in a little house of prayer in a

valley, or even in the palace of a king, there dwells a man who lives by the golden mirror; and when his countenance is upon it, the eyes of the Lord light up.

But we also know that in every generation there arise men who smash the mirror and laugh aloud at this story, and try to steal the sun for themselves. They race along the roads of the earth, cutting down men, women, and children, thinking in their very madness to rise to the top.

And the Lord's patient reminder of sleep and darkness is of no avail, so that the raving continues until they, too, drop into final darkness and others rise to take their vainglorious place.

Will there ever come the day when we will return to a Land of Golden Mirrors, or must we live on and on ever in dread of devils intoxicated?

THE NEARSIGHTED GARDENER

N THE OLDEN DAYS, when the good Lord was near and neighbors far away, there lived a man near Jericho. He tilled his field, tended his garden, loved his wife and children, and recited his morning and evening prayers with lusty voice and firm faith. Only one thing there was that troubled him. He had to incline his head to observe his fruits and flowers, and even when saying his prayers he could not stand up straight like the other sons of Israel, but had to bow his head to read.

When he flattered his wife about her milky skin and teeth and compared her to the flowers of his garden, she would mockingly ascribe it all to his nearsightedness. His friends called him "gullible David," because, when they held up some scrawny lamb and said, "What a beautiful animal!" he would repeat, "A beautiful animal!" Or if they pointed to a field of scrubby brush and

exclaimed, "What a fine orchard!" he would repeat, "Indeed, a fine orchard." And they would joke among themselves about how gullible David was.

Sometimes he realized that they poked fun at him. That hurt him, because he loved his friends and wanted them to love him too and not laugh at him.

So one day, while he still had his prayer shawl over his shoulders and his prayer tongs over his hand and head, he put the Book aside and addressed himself personally to the good Lord—which, to begin with, was not a proper thing to do, for the Book contains prescribed prayers for all the occasions on which it might be appropriate to bother the Lord. But our gardener was not a learned man, and he uttered a prayer in his own words.

It was rather a lament than a request. He yearned for one thing only, to have the kind of eyesight that would allow him to see things far off and make all details as close as if they were two fists away. With that, he kissed the Good Book, folded his shawl and prayer tongs and put them away in the chest.

His prayer finished, he sat down at the table to have his morning gruel. But after one look at his plate and the decanter containing the milk,

he put the spoon aside and berated his wife.

"How dare you put unclean gruel on my plate? And look at this piece of bread! Look at this cup of milk! Even the fruit on the plate is dirty."

"I see dirt nowhere," retorted his wife, "neither on the plates nor in the cup nor on your bread. You must be out of your mind!"

Infuriated, the gardener left his table and ran out into the field. But what had become of everything? His beautiful garden, his flowers growing in graceful symmetry, his well-tended orchard and the vineyard to which he devoted most of his attention—how terrible they all looked! Gone was the harmony among the flowers. No two of them were in line. And how could he ever have thought that all these misshapen petals were of one cut? No two were alike. And those buds with the little worms hiding between them and between the leaves and behind the stems. How had they ever escaped his eye?

No longer was this his flower carpet; it was just a patch of wild growth, looking more like weeds than nurtured queens of the garden. Why, he could even see the bits of manure pushed up from beneath the surface by the growing stems. And these ugly, overhanging clumps of grapes—how could he ever have thought they were a mirror

of the sun, shiny, pearl-like? Why, he could see their skin as if they were two fists away. And more, he could see that skin ten times larger than it really was. There was no sheen on it; it looked rather shabby, like the skin of his own hand. Ugly! In fact, how ugly his own skin was! It looked ten times larger than he had seen it before. He was able to see every little fold and every tiny pimple —and how distasteful the hairs, growing out of little fatty mounds!

What an ugly world it was! He looked at the forests; he took a look at his orchard and closed his eyes. Gone were the beautiful trees, reaching for the sky! All he saw was mean and ugly bark, with thousands of grubs hiding in its wrinkles, vermin so small that he had never thought they could exist.

In despair, he ran back into the house. He saw his wife, and covered his face and turned away. Was this his beautiful Chulema? He could see yellow spots on her teeth and tiny remnants of the breakfast on her lips. And her face! Her young and beautiful face was an ocean of folds and creases on hairy skin. He had never known that all of her face was covered with hair.

"I am cursed, Chulema!" he yelled. "I am cursed for my selfish prayer. Give me back my

poor eyes, O Lord! O kind Lord, give me back the eyes that in Your mercy allowed me to see so little, so blissfully little."

We do not know what became of the gardener. But the Lord is merciful.

THE WORMS TURN

T IS TOLD that a Roman scholar once came to see the great sage Hillel, and asked the teacher, "Why is it, O wise man, that in your wisdom you still look upon all things as a Jew? I am a Roman, but I often disengage myself from my nationality and speak simply as a man. In fact, I quite often find myself speaking against Rome—within reason, of course."

"What you really are asking," said the rabbi, "is why we Hebrews do not admire your Roman art and culture. I shall answer you in an allegory, if I may.

"A long time ago, when the world was still green and all spoke the language of one and one spoke the language of all, the good Lord arranged for a concert at the edge of the woods. The performer was a beautiful bluebird; the audience, all the animals the woods could hold. The lion was there and the camel, the fox and the crow

—even the fish in the nearby brook raised their heads to listen.

"The bluebird gave a magnificent performance. It sang so beautifully that even the pigeons cried, and, as you know, they have no tears.

"But way down in the darkness of a small bush, hidden under a big leaf, there was a little worm with a bitter face. When the concert was finished and all the creatures applauded by hiss or growl, squeak or bellow, the worm just stared.

"A nearby weed with a big red flower on its chest watched the worm for a while and then, unable to restrain itself any longer, spoke out, 'You worms are certainly peculiar. Everybody is happy and enjoying himself, yet you remain glum in the midst of all this beautiful music.'

"The worm turned and said to the weed, 'All of you can listen to the music and enjoy it, but I know that when he is finished the bluebird is going to *eat* me!' "

So spoke Rabbi Hillel. The Roman philosopher nodded, sighed, and pursued the subject no further.

THE STATUE

IT IS SAID that if you sit at a gate of Jerusalem for a thousand years and a day, every living person of this world will walk by you. We know that this is not so, because of all those who are born half will die before their time and most of the other half will never see the Holy City.

Many have read the history of the world, but how many know the history that never came to pass—the ships of no return, the men who died before they were born, the castles that never became stone and tower, the books that were never written, the melodies that were never played?

There are crossways in history and crossways in the life of man. Perhaps there are crossways in the heavens, too! At such crossways stood Jerusalem at the beginning of what is called the new era of the western world.

Why the death of a city, even one so glorious and beautiful as Jerusalem, should mark the be-

ginning of a new era I do not know. But the Romans were at the city's throat, and, as they had done with a hundred other towns and countries, they proved masters of terror and destruction.

For two years, with stones and burning oil, with ram and catapult, the Romans—led by Caesar, and then a new Caesar—poured constant destruction upon a hapless people.

In despair, after two years of crumbling walls and starving soldiers, a captain of the besieged, a son of the House of David, Gamaliel the One-Armed, was sent to Babylon to seek help from his people living abroad.

Gamaliel crossed the enemy lines at night under cover of rain. And he attained his destination—but not his purpose. We all know that for a long time the Hebrews of Babylon had been at a crossways, and the way they chose was the one of indifference.

Who knows in what shape the world would be today if the swords of Babylon had joined the spears of Jerusalem? The armies of Titus were as weary as were those of the Hebrews, and relief for the Romans was much in doubt. In the days of Titus every sixth man at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, from Carthage to Alexandria and from the Nile to the Hellespont, was of Hebrew descent.

Had it not been for the juggernaut that was Rome, and for the later hate that, in the name of Christian love and Christian purity, dealt the rack, the torch, and forced conversion, the people of Israel would today be the greatest nation in the western world. The Book compared their numbers to "the sand near the ocean"—but the sand ran out and the dead do not multiply.

It is said that in the time of Ezra the Babylonian Jews erected on the banks of the Tigris a gigantic statue of King David the Conqueror. The learned and the faithful never looked upon the statue, because the Book forbids any image of man in stone or wood or paint, but the wealthy and the reckless had learned from their Gentile neighbors a new manner of honoring their own great. Perhaps they wanted to put safely into stone what they did not care to put into their lives.

They called the statue "David Awaiting Goliath." The pedestal was so high that one could see the king's forehead from beyond six hills and six valleys. At the base of the great structure there were carved on each side the faces and bodies of pagan kings—ten kings in robes of red, ten in robes of blue, and ten in green and in purple.

Captain Gamaliel went from group to group and from prayer house to prayer house, pleading

for the armed youth of the Jews of Babylon. It is said that during those days the brow of the statue of David glistened from a great distance. It is also true that when Gamaliel left Babylon with a heart empty of promise, his one arm clutching his sword, on the morning following his departure the people of the city were amazed to discover that the king's statue had disappeared from its pedestal. All that remained of the noble monument were the little figures of the futile little kings—ten in red, ten in blue, and ten in green and in purple.

RABBI KERAH'S TREASURE

LONG TIME AGO, when the great *tannaim,* the teachers, traveled from Jerusalem to Babylon and back, teaching the Law to the judges of tomorrow, there lived a young man in Safed who kept close to himself. He was a devout listener and a diligent student, who eagerly lent his ears to the words of wisdom and parables from the lips of his teachers.

This young man, whom we shall call Kerah, was especially intent upon the allegories and legendary tales his rabbis related to clarify a point of law or a matter of custom. But, unlike the other students, who even while still learning spread the helpful messages imparted to them, Kerah husbanded all the parables and stories and put them in a little cedar box which he always carried with him. As he grew older and wiser, his box of stories grew heavier and heavier.

Kerah was forever a student, but never did he

become a teacher or judge or even a preacher. He kept his soul and his cedar box solitary. He must have done well by himself, because he appeared content and proud. Living according to the Law a life of explicit observance and self-containment, he never violated any precept. Even his charity was by the letter, not by the heart.

When he died, out of respect for his learning and devotion the citizens buried him in that part of the cemetery known as *Beth ha-Chaim*. You see, in Safed, which was a holy city, the cemetery was divided into three parts: the House of the Sinners, the House of the People, and the House of Life. The citizens felt that Rabbi Kerah, as they called him, was fully deserving of the latter honor because, I must add here, wisdom was always identified by the people of Israel with life, and the more wisdom a man had, with so much more life was he endowed and so much more of him would remain forever alive. For this reason they called the cemetery of the wise men the House of the Living. I must also mention at this time that the citizens of Safed buried Rabbi Kerah's cedar box with him, since he had never been seen without it. Knowing that he was not a rich man, they did not bother to open the box, which, as we shall see, would have been a fruitful thing to do.

When the body had been seven days underground, strange things began to happen. (For seven days the relatives of a deceased person sit a mournful *shivah,* meaning "seven". During these days the soul of the departed is still tied to the earth; after that, it is back with its Maker.) On the eighth day, when people came again to the *Beth ha-Chaim* to bury another saintly person, the legend tells that they heard eerie sounds from the grave of Rabbi Kerah. These sounds came forth from the cemetery night after night.

Naturally, the soul of Rabbi Kerah was called back by the muted voices from his grave, and a committee of three judges was appointed by Gabriel, Angel of the Watch, to interpret the legal meaning of this unparalleled event. The judges found that the whole *Gemara*—the discursive part of the Talmud—had been shut in the cedar box and was aching to reach the ears of the people. It is said that, on certain nights, the whole city of Safed would tremble under the pressure of the locked-in parables.

All three judges agreed that it was indeed a transgression to acquire learning without making an effort to enlighten others. But the judges hesitated to punish Rabbi Kerah for being a miser of the Talmud because in neither the Torah nor the Mishnah was there provision for such an

offense.

Weeks and weeks went by, and the judges could find no solution, until, in desperation, they called for the advice of the great Hillel, whose soul was resting in peace in the highest realm of the highest of the heavens. And Hillel ruled:

"There is a town, Ashkenazi, far up in the North, where there are a hundred of our people who have little or no learning. It has reached our ears that the town is called by the neighboring villages 'the city of gab.' Let us take the box of cedar there and place it in the *Beth-ha-Midrash,* the House of Study, where there is so much talk and so little study."

So it came to be. The angels took the box from the House of Life in Safed to the House of Study in Ashkenazi. And whenever you come across a man who quotes the *Talmud,* or the *Halakhah,* or the *Gemara,* pay heed, he may be one of the men of Ashkenazi relating a secret tale of Rabbi Kerah.

THE LAND OF THE PERUSHIM

THERE IS A LEGEND in the Kabbalah, that there lived a man in Safed, hundreds of years ago, a shoemaker named Aaron. He was a man troubled by grave doubts. He was not sure of himself. When he gave charity, he wondered if he were not gullible, taken in by false claims of people only feigning poverty. Yet when he withheld charity, doubt arose again. Had he failed to do his duty, as is expected of the pious? If someone read from the Book of Law, he was doubtful whether he should accept certain passages. However, if a day passed and he had not read his daily portion, remorse troubled him.

Such was the life of Aaron Hagorem. He was forever seeking friends, but when he had them he regarded them with suspicion. When he received benefits, he sought a reason why anyone should select him as the recipient. When people refused to cooperate or lend him a helping hand, he be-

came bitter about the character of man in general, and the people of Safed in particular. When men rose to power in his community, he wondered what their intentions were. He himself had no ambitions except to lead the right life. This, perhaps, is the greatest ambition of all.

It was a Passover evening, when a remarkable incident occurred that changed the life and outlook of Aaron Hagorem.

As you know, on Sabbaths and high Jewish holidays the pious are endowed with two souls. One is the mortal soul our body carries around day by day and puts to bed at night; the other is part of another world—or, shall I say, part of the other worlds, the faraway ones.

On just such an evening, after Aaron Hagorem had said his blessing, he experienced a peculiar feeling. Someone was speaking to him within his own body, almost as though he were talking to himself. But his lips were not moving, and the voice he heard only with his heart. It said, "I am your better soul; I come from *Beth ha-Chaim,* the House of Life."

For a while, for a moment at least, Aaron thought perhaps this was the Angel of Death.

But the voice continued, "Do not fear. I know you are troubled; that is why I am here. You are forever in doubt about everything and about

everybody. Perhaps when you see the rest of the world you will know truth from falsehood, and doubt will no longer afflict you."

As soon as these words were spoken, Aaron felt himself lifted away from the table where he had been sitting with his friends and kinfolk. He was passing through the roof of his house into the starlit sky, and beyond. He could not tell how long he traveled in the blue of the night, but always about him were the silvery stars. And at many places Aaron saw people of strange appearance speaking words he had never heard before. He beheld creatures he could not imagine existed —they looked like neither man nor animal nor any picture he had seen. There were colors he had never even dreamed. There were fantastic buildings and amazing plants, forests, meadows, and oceans of such beauty that he could not describe them.

Finally he mustered his courage and spoke aloud, as if to himself, "You, Voice from Heaven, who have brought me here to the middle of nowhere, tell me, what are all these strange worlds, these unknown creatures? These amazing colors, these things I have never seen nor heard—what is all this? Are these people like me? Do they worship my God?"

And the Voice said, "There is but one God,

and those who know worship Him. Those who do not know merely walk about with their faces turned away. They make believe there is nothing behind them; they make believe there is nothing ahead of them—that they are just here, and that is all. In the heavens we call them *Perushim,* the people separated from the rest.

"But you are Aaron, the doubter, and I will tell you: God is not only your God, and this world upon which your little house stands is not His only world. There are a million worlds in God's universe, and what you call your world of worlds is merely a little corner of His endless universe of universes. God is *Ain Soph*—there is no end. God is *Elohim,* which is eternity to eternity—and those who think that God is here to serve their little prayers and their little world alone have only a tiny God for their tiny fate. But God *Elohim* is One and Eternal and Endless."

With that the Voice stopped. A little later, the blue of the air became black, and out of the black Aaron could make out the gray of land. That is where they stopped, Aaron and his soul. The land they trod on was not much different from that around Safed. There were houses like those in Safed; there were people like those in Safed; and they spoke and dressed like the men and women and children of Safed. But as Aaron the

shoemaker and his visiting soul wandered about, there *was* something unusual that they noted. No two houses were close together, nor did any two face each other. They were separate, and every one faced away from the other.

"You see," the Voice resumed, "this is the world of the *Perushim*. It is not much different from your world, but all the people are turned away from one another. They do nothing for another unless they get something in return. They give no charity and they show no compassion. All is done with a purpose—the purpose of gain. Even the children expel their parents once they no longer need them, and the parents raise the children in order to gain something from them. Brother speaks not to brother and sister speaks not to sister, unless it be a demand or a threat or a deal. See, far away on the hill, the temple. It has been empty for a long time. Those who seek no God desert His temple; those who seek no friends leave the company of fellowmen; and those who seek no love leave father and mother—they can no longer gain from them. This, Aaron, is the land of the *Perushim,* those who have turned away.

"Our sages said, 'Man lives not by bread alone but by the love of fellowman.' The *Perushim,* they do not live by bread alone, but by the hate

of fellowman. There are two kinds of people in your world: those who take love with their daily bread, and those who take hate with their daily bread. Hate with all its spices—envy, greed, ambition, ruthlessness, and selfishness—they feed on it, they grow on it, and they die with it.

"No one will ever know the nature of the Lord. In all His mysterious worlds of worlds, no one will know the limits of His universes. No one can fathom how all this came about, these millions and millions of God's creations. But we do know that while we are His guests on one of His worlds we should bow to His spirit and let *Shechinah* be the guest. *Shechinah* is the indwelling of God in man.

"Aaron, shoemaker of Safed, have no doubts. Walk in the path of righteousness and be good to your fellowman. The rest? No matter, no matter. Kindness will conquer all, and if you had the knowledge of all the astrologers and all the scribes, and you had no love for your fellowman, you would be a thorn in the sight of your Lord. The world of the *Perushim* is full of clever people, but their springs are slimy with hate and their bread is bitter with malice. Go back to Safed and stand upright, and whatever happiness may be in store for man, you shall partake of it, because the love that you give is its own reward,

just as the taste of hatred is its own punishment."

No sooner were these words spoken than Aaron Hagorem woke up. He was back at his Passover table, and the children had just closed the door because someone had said he had heard the prophet Elijah come in. Amen.

A VISIT WITH A DEAD FRIEND

N THE EARLY PART of the eighteenth century there lived at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains a strange and most unusual rabbi. His name was Israel ben Eliezer. He wandered through the little towns of Poland preaching a new message, the message of direct worship of the Lord, the message of cheer and kindness, and the gospel of *shiflut,* or "humility."

Through all the towns of eastern Europe, the fame of this great *zaddik* (righteous one) spread, and many were the tales of his miraculous deeds; in fact, the people referred to him never by his given name but as *Baal Shem Tov,* Master of the Good Name.

There was no doubt in their minds that the *zaddik* went every Friday on a flight to the heavens to consult with the Lord about the weighty problems of the little people in that part of the world.

One Friday night, after the blessings and the dinner, the *chassidim,* or followers of the rabbi, were sitting about a sumptuous table drinking their wine and chanting Sabbath songs, celebrating the arrival of the holy day. Baal Shem sat melancholy in his deep chair. One of his followers leaned over and asked, "Master, it is not like you to be so downcast. Tell us, have the heavens made you sad? What did you encounter there? Tell us."

The rabbi stroked his beard, pondered, and said, "If I am grieved, it is because the world is full of foolish people who hold on to tinsel and throw away the most precious things.

"This afternoon while I was resting in my study, the spirits, blessed be they, took me far into the heavens to visit my young cousin who died in Vienna many years ago. He died a rich man, with many honors and accomplishments."

The *chassidim* burst forth with eager questions: "Tell us, Master, what did he look like? Did he recognize you? How does he feel—or does he feel nothing?"

Baal Shem heaved a deep sigh and continued: "I found my cousin Sholem in the midst of a handsome crowd. His beard was still brown, and his face shone like the setting sun. He sat on a throne, and was surrounded by a thousand little

things, each one glistening like a pearl. From afar came music and voices such as only the heavens can send forth, and there were visitors with him, just two or three, sitting on the ground.

" 'What are all these jewels?' I asked in amazement, after we had shaken hands and embraced each other.

" ' Look closer, my cousin,' said Sholem. 'You should remember many of these precious things.'

"I went nearer, for my eyes are not so sharp as they used to be. Then I saw that these weren't jewels at all; they were only cast-off objects. I saw a little bell that my cousin had once found in the yard when as boys we played at our grandfather's home. I saw an old watch without hands which our uncle had given us to take apart. There was a cracked set of *tefillin* (phylacteries) I remembered having seen somewhere in the attic, and there was a simple pin his mother had used to fasten her shawl. Behold, what I had thought to be a throne upon which Sholem sat was only the old kitchen stool he used to sit on to watch his mother at her baking.

"Such, and no better, were all the many things surrounding him in his heavenly abode—the things that had looked to me like sublime jewelry. And then I could make out the sweet voices from afar. They were only the sad chants we had

learned in our tiny *shul,* hummed by the frail little cantor. And the friends around my cousin were Chaim, the tailor who gave him a home while he studied in Vienna; and Moishe, the youthful comrade whom Sholem had neglected when he became a rich man. A true friend always forgives and forgets—at least in heaven.

"But nowhere did I see a sign of all the important people and expensive luxuries that had surrounded my cousin when he was so big a man that one couldn't get near him unless one were of the same dimensions or bigger. And, as you know, in our town there are only little people.

"I tell you, not one of the magnates, not one of the elegant personages who used to surround my cousin did I see there up above, in the clouds. And none of the precious objects of gold, none of the papers with the important signatures did I see there—not even the letter from the Kaiser himself when he made Sholem one of the councilors of his court. The only letter I found was the one his father had written a day before he died, right in this city, a thousand miles from Vienna. It was in poor script, because my uncle was not a learned man. It said little more than over and over again, *Baruch habibi, baruch habibi* . . . 'Blessed be thou, O my beloved.'

"Before I came down from the clouds, because

the holy evening was drawing nearer and nearer, I again embraced my cousin, and asked him, 'Give me a word, my friend, before I part.'

"And he said to me, with tears in his eyes, 'If a sinner may teach a sage: the world hangs on to tinsel and make-believe, while the most precious things are those that people throw away.' "

THREE LIVES

NE OF HIS PUPILS once came up to Rabbi Akiba and said, "Tell me, Master, why do you pray thrice? Isn't once enough? Isn't one prayer, said rightly, of full value?"

The great sage replied: "Man lives not one life, but three. There are three stages of life through which we all must wander.

"One is the life of dreams, when tomorrow is real and today is but a step toward it. Such life is abundant. There is no weight to the dreams, and we rise with them like a flight of birds to the top of a rainbow. Such is our first life.

"Our second life is led with our eyes to the ground. There we see the green of the fields and the blue of the water and, far away, even a bit of gray sky, and we write our story into the green, into the blue, and into the gray. Is it good or is it bad? Is it beautiful or is it drab? Perhaps it is all of these; perhaps it is none. Such is our second

life.

"Then there is the third. The third life is not lived on the ground and still it is not in the beyond. It is not a dream, yet it glows like a rainbow. It is in our hearts and yet it is in a book —*the* Book. To know that you are one with all you perceive, that your people of the past and your people of tomorrow are woven into one cloth—such is the third life, my son, the life of awareness.

"And so I pray for the life of my youth, for the life of my fighting years, and for my life in the service of my Lord.

"So also, my son, do we die thrice. When our dreams have died, we still live. When our desires have died, we still live. What is left then is our love. The heart of love will live forever, long after dream and desire have passed away. If our love dies, then we have never lived."

SHIVAH

NCE UPON A TIME, when Saul the King was hard-pressed in stemming the soldiers of Edom, there served in the army of Israel a man named Jeshu and his son Habam. Many were the battles they fought together, and great was the anguish and privation they shared, Jeshu because he loved his people and Habam because he loved his father.

It came to pass on a night of battle that the company with Jeshu was ambushed in the brushlands and, while Jeshu remained unscathed, his son Habam was mortally wounded.

Now soldiers in battle pay short heed to Death; he is their constant companion, and when his gruesome features appear they are rarely given a second glance. But Jeshu kneeled, grieving, at the body of his son night after night, long after his comrades had gone. He neither wept nor wailed, although he had loved his son with all

the love in him; and there was none to share his grief, for the enemy had taken all his kin and friends.

It is said that the ears of the angels are deaf to the beat and clatter of the human voice. But if a man has lost his voice in profound grief and devotion, the whisper that emanates from his soul is like the breath of wind before Creation; and such a spirit can touch the ears of angels. It is told that such was the sorrow of Jeshu over his fallen son that the birds in the thicket forsook their flight, and even the snakes lay still in the sand.

For seven days and seven nights Jeshu kneeled over Habam; he neither ate nor drank nor closed his weary eyelids. On the seventh night he rose and, facing the stars, spoke to the Lord:

"Hear me, Thou Blessed Creator. I have lived my years and sinned my share. I have striven and sickened, I have loved and won. I have seen and heard the good and the evil, the everyday conduct of man. I have stumbled again and again. I am content, my Lord; let me meet the end. But my son, who is young and whose thoughts are green and tender, let him be, my Lord, let him be."

Again it is told that the angels heard this prayer and brought it before the Eternal One. And as the

angels spoke of Jeshu and his son, of the lonely man left in the swathe of warfare, their whisper was like the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Then Jeshu heard a call through the distant night:

"Take heart, Jeshu. A man is to live and a man is to die; such is the chain I have spun around mankind. But thou hast broken the chain with the keenness of thy devotion. I shall not take thy life today. What is given is unalterable. But I shall cut thy years in half, and give half to thy son, that you both may live for time to come."

This is how Jeshu related the events of the seven days and seven nights and how they came to a close. And on the last morning Habam arose and fell into the arms of his father.

Until our time, for seven days our people keep watch for their beloved dead—unwashed, unattended, waiting, perhaps, for a sign from above.

THE LOVER OF THE LAW

N OUR MYTHOLOGY you will find many versions of how Sodom, the City of Sin, was destroyed.

Many men and women lived there who were of the cynical breed, and in the true meaning of this word they lived like canines, like animals, for the moment, for themselves, and for no good. But there were many others who did not know which way to turn—should they run with the cynics or should they walk the path of righteousness?

So for three days and three nights the Lord of Mercy, who was called an angry God, put a wall of fire around the city. This should have been seen as a warning, but the people took it as their doom. Why should we obey the Law or respect the commandments, they said, if we are to perish? The Lord has forsaken us; let us live for ourselves. So they plunged yet more wildly into their

dogs' life. Friend betrayed friend, brother destroyed brother, in a last rampage of violence and lechery.

Finally the punishing flames began to stride across the walls, through the streets, and under the roofs. No one was spared, neither man nor woman—none, that is, but Johanan the shepherd.

When the city was consumed, a pile of rubble and ashes, it is said that people who came to visit the shame that was Sodom saw the shepherd wandering among the ruins, bewildered and searching. And for all the rest of his life he was never again called Johanan; the Holy Man of Sodom became his name.

When people came from the four corners of Israel to hear his words on the law of the land, which was the Law of God, he said to them:

"I know no more about the Law than you do, no more than any one of you does, but I live by it, not because I fear the Law, but because I love it."

THE DEVIL OF THE TONGUE

T IS TOLD that there once lived a king in Egypt who summoned his high priest and asked him to send him the best and the worst parts of the next sacrificed animal. The priest sent him the animal's tongue, together with a papyrus reading: "The tongue is the best part, for it carries the soothing words of friendship and the whisper of love; and it also is the worst part, for it bears the sting of hate and humiliation."

THE THIRD TRY

HEN THE GOOD LORD ordered abundance in creation, a trembling went through the earth, which suddenly became alive with creatures, plants, and waters. And the Lord took it upon Himself to look back upon what had just occurred. He was pleased with what He had done, but something was lacking. A thousand living creatures strewn all over the globe, a thousand trees rising to the skies, and a thousand waters glistening in the sun—and yet nothing that could return His love. So God decided to create something in an image of Himself, in His own likeness and in His own spirit.

What is the gentlest creature? God decided it might be the dove, so He placed the dove on His finger and breathed into it His breath of divinity. The dove flew away in a happy circle, and the Lord smiled.

Days went by and night after night descended on the earth, and there then appeared the dove,

fluttering before the Lord.

"Let me not be a dove if I am to be Your very own," it asked. "My days are spent in haste, fleeing the hawk and the eagle and the vulture, and my nights are passed in fear of the sudden owl. Let me be an antelope, roaming the wide, open plains, swift and untroubled."

So the Lord blessed the divine spirit and drew it away from the dove—and before His grace there then stood an antelope imbued with divine attributes.

The antelope shook itself, and off it went—nay, flew—into the forest. But no sooner had a day passed than the antelope returned, rueful and dejected.

"My Lord," it said, "I made a bitter choice. The forest is full of my enemies—the wolf, the lion, and the tiger. Only the nights are mine. It is only half a life I lead. Pray forgive me, but I would be someone else. Make me so that I can pass my days without fear and without hunger."

The Lord pondered and pondered, and with His right had He grasped a rock and crushed it between His fingers. Then He said: "From this dust I shall make a creature that is stronger than any animal on earth; I shall make a creature that can take its food from all that grows in abundance." Thus man came about in the Lord's image

and in his present shape, neither fish nor fowl nor antelope—the Lord's most personal creation.

It is said that when man stood before Him, upright and without fur or scales on his skin, the Lord called in His six seraphim. They folded their wings and stared in astonishment. And the Lord spoke:

"Adam, you are My very own. You lived in fear that the vultures would drink your blood—never do you drink the blood of any creature. You were in fear that the wolves would kill you—never do you kill any other creature. You lived in dread of the night lest your neighbors offend you—do you love your neighbor; he is like you.

"There is abundant growth of nature. But your soul must be fed, too. This earth has two foods for the soul: love and hate. If you feed your soul on hate, you will grow to like evil and envy, conquest and destruction. But if you feed your soul on love, you will come to like the life for which I have chosen you.

"I must return now to my thousand other worlds, of which this is one. I shall not come back, perhaps, for a thousand times a thousand years. Remember, Adam, the choice is yours."

As the Lord disappeared, Adam could hear the voice of the seraphim from far away, *"Ko amar Adonai*—Thus spake the Lord." Adam stood there alone, his head bowed.

SHOFAR

ANY ARE THE LEGENDS that grew out of the flight of the Jews from Egypt. Some tales survived among Israelites living in exile or isolation; others remained with the main bodies of our people—in the North among the Ashkenazim, in the West among the Sephardim, and in the East among the Babylonian Jews. One such legend is of the *shofar,* the ram's horn that is blown every New Year to call the people together in the house of prayer.

In those crucial days in ancient Egypt, the great Prince Moses secretly named captains to call their flocks together when the time came to start the Great Return. But first, said Moses, they had to agree upon a signal. His counselors were fearful of using Egyptian trumpets or cymbals since their brazen sound was often heard and might lead to confusion among the people. Moreover, loud instruments might warn their

Egyptian oppressors. Finally they hit upon the weird, unique sound of the ram's horn. Rarely, if ever, was such a horn used as a musical instrument, and for that very reason the Hebrew prince chose it as the means for calling together the people of Israel.

When the great morning came, the sound of the *shofar* was heard from one end of the Nile valley to the other. The Israelites cast down their burdens, threw off their yoke, gathered together, and set out upon the desert trek that was to bring them back into the Land of Promise.

To this very day, to commemorate this historic event, during the holy days our people are again called to the sacred services by the sound of the ram's horn.

THE DEVIL'S LITTLE JOKE

UR WISE MEN relate that when the good Lord was about finished with His work of creation He sat atop a mountain surveying the creatures before Him as they roamed through the fields and forests and waters. Even the worms crawling underground did not escape His divine eye.

At this serene moment, Lucifer or Lilith—I am not sure which—happened along and mockingly said, "Why not create an animal that could be any of the others at will?"

The Lord pondered and pondered and played with the soft, cold clay under His feet and shaped a funny-looking animal without wings and without fins, without feelers and without claws, and with only two legs instead of four. And that is how man was born.

And, while all the other animals were created in pairs, the good Lord created only one of this

strange being, for a joke is only a joke and there is no need to carry it too far.

"Go hence," said the Lord to man. But man lay still, so the Lord bent over the earthen form, and blew some life into the mouth of clay. It is because of that wisp of breath that man ever since has considered himself to be some sort of divine creature.

And from that day of the devil's sardonic suggestion, man has been versed in the art of putting himself into the skin of other animals. While a fox is a fox and a wolf is a wolf and a bear is a bear, man can be a lamb today and a wolf tomorrow, play dove in the morning and hawk in the evening.

EZRA AND THE TORAH

LIVING NATION is like a chain, like a strong chain—big, solid, and secure. But sometimes it happens that, as a chain is strained, buffeted, broken, a nation's people may go down and under. And sometimes a nation is held together by the link of a single man. Blessed are the people among whom such a man appears at such a time!

More than once in our history have events pushed like wild streams, relentlessly, against our chain of tradition and our chain of life.

In ancient days, when our people were about to disappear into serfdom under Pharaoh, there arose Prince Moses, who shaped the yielding masses into one hard and solid form. In our own time, Theodor Herzl singlehandedly set the mold for the new state of Israel.

In the fifth century before our era, our people dwelt on the banks of the river in Babylon. They

had been brought there as captives by King Nebuchadnezzar, who had swept into the valley of the Jordan with armies gathered from all the provinces of his empire, and had put the Hebrew towns and the Temple of Jerusalem to the torch.

But the empire of Nebuchadnezzar soon fell before Cyrus, king of Persia, who gave their freedom back to the sons of Israel and bade them return home if they so desired.

King Cyrus was a generous king; many of the Hebrews who had suffered from the cruelty of the Babylonians were pleased by the good life under him. They were willing to forget the duties to which the Lord had called them in order to enjoy their newly acquired ease.

Some reasoned that they would return only if a Messiah, an "anointed" prophet, where to lead them. Others argued that they could still remain faithful sons of Jacob in the king's land, with the king's permission. And lastly, more than a few arrogated to themselves the right to become Persians who worshiped at the Hebrew altar, rather than to remain Hebrews in a foreign land.

In those crucial days there appeared in Babylon Ezra the Scribe, who was versed in the law of the land as well as in the ancient Law of his people. With patience and ardor he set about the task of repairing the breaking chain of his people, *shal-*

shelet ha-cabbalah.

Like Socrates the Greek, he went from man to man and youth to youth, in an ardent endeavor to awaken, or rekindle, the flame of national unity and national identity. At the same time, he searched in synagogues and caves for hidden scrolls and scripts of the sacred writings.

When his friends argued that he, being neither anointed nor of priestly background, could make no new covenant between the people and the Lord, Ezra replied, "Our people have a covenant from the days of Noah, Abraham, and Moses. They must renew the ancient pact. I am only a scribe, and all I do is collect the scrolls as evidence of its existence." So it came about that in the year 450 before our era the scribe Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with barely a thousand followers.

But soon this thousand multiplied many times. The pen of Ezra became the great sword of separation, which divided Judaism from paganism; and from the yellowed scrolls that lay buried in caves and cellars, from these battered scraps, grew the great script that we call *Tenach: Torah, Nebiim, Ketubim.* We do not know what the Torah, or guide, was when Noah made the covenant with the Lord. We do not know the covenant of Abraham. And we know of the covenant of Moses

only as faithful Ezra handed it on to his and our generations.

"Do not despoil the heritage of our people," said Ezra. "Live alongside your neighbor, but live with your own." Out of chaos and confusion, in the midst of a sea of idolatry, rose the new Israel. Before its eyes the Temple was rebuilt in new glory, and its hands held the ancient Torah restored by Ezra the Scribe.

In every house in every town where the sons of Jacob dwelt, there was nailed to the gatepost a roll of parchment upon which was written the Jewish profession of faith. Soon, in Persia, in Egypt, and in Rome, until our day and for all days to come, the *mezuzah* on the gate became another symbol of unity and faithfulness and awareness of the ancient command: *"Shema Yisrael*— Hear O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One. And thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

THE SMILING SON

O YOU KNOW how a sugar beet changed the life of a whole town? Well, far off in the Middle East, where Europe meets Asia, there was a cobbler who had two sons. Now he could leave his shop to only one of them, and the boys were beginning to grow up, so he worried considerably. One day he went to the rabbi. The wise man told him to bequeath the shop to the older son and to let the younger one chew a sugar beet every day.

The cobbler did as he was told, being a simple man who dared not question the wisdom of a holy man.

Soon he observed that the young boy's features were changing. His face took on a peculiar smiling expression, obviously from the constant chewing of the beets. The people of the town, unaware of the cause, began to call the boy "the smiling son." Somehow everybody wanted him around.

The teachers liked him, the merchants liked him, all the boys and girls desired his company. As he grew older, the people vied with each other in giving him employment and, to end this story, he soon became a scribe and later the mayor of the town. And all because of the sugar beets.

PIG AND LONG PIG

HOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO, the biblical Jacob used to wander with his brother Esau through the brushlands of the East. Esau was armed with bow and arrows, Jacob with only a staff.

Once, reaching the edge of a wilderness, they found no living creature within sight. Esau kept his customary lookout for game, but Jacob followed reluctantly, his eyes directed only at the beauties of the landscape. For Esau took his chief delight in hunting down fowl and beast, while Jacob shunned the kill and frowned upon the trap. Even at meals Jacob preferred the fruits and greens and berries of the field to the bleeding flesh of animals.

As evening darkened, they pitched their camp. But no sooner had they fallen asleep than a shriek startled them from their slumbers. They rose, listened cautiously, and then moved in the direc-

tion of the sound. Jacob had learned from Esau how to slide noiselessly over the ground as they hunted. Silently, they came upon a group of dark men encamped in a clearing.

Esau stepped forth boldly, spear poised. The strangers displayed no sign of surprise or anger, but continued their task of preparing their meal over a large fire.

Then Jacob came near, to ask what had been the cause of the fearful cry they had heard. Grinning, one savage pointed to the fire and the brothers beheld the horrible spectacle of a boiling human corpse.

"Taste a bit," invited one of the strangers. "We call it 'long pig.' It tastes just like pig, and its blood is like wine."

Jacob turned back toward the forest in disgust and terror, with Esau at his heels. Neither spoke a word. All night they tried to grope their way out into the open from the blackness of the woods.

After this incident, Jacob no longer followed Esau on his hunting expeditions. He vowed to his God that never would the blood of any living being befoul his lips. The flesh of the pig remained a particular abomination to him for all time.

Centuries later, when Moses, prince of Israel, set down the laws of his people on parchment

scrolls, he forbade them to drink of blood or eat of the swine. Thus did the children of Jacob honor the wishes and customs of their ancestor, also called Israel, which means "one who has striven with God."

THE LIVING DEAD

MANY THOUSANDS of years ago, when Moses, a prince in the house of Egypt, was ready to lead his people into the Promised Land, he was told by the elders that Israel could not leave unless they bore with them the body of Joseph the Righteous. Before Joseph died, you see, he made the elders of Israel promise that if and when they returned home, they would take his body with them and bury him in holy soil. So, while the Hebrews waited anxiously to leave Egypt, Moses and the elders went in search of the body of Joseph. But they could not find it. The great Judge had died more than three hundred years before, and no one knew where he had been laid to rest.

In their weary search, they came upon a village on the River Nile. The villagers told them that there lived on the edge of the village, in a stone house, an old, old woman who could not die.

Moses went to the stone house and bowed deeply as he entered the low door. In a corner of the room sat an ancient woman whose wrinkled face was still of astonishing beauty.

"I have been waiting for you, Moshe, my Prince," she whispered. "I was a servant in the house of the great Judge. I sat at the feet of the Friend of Kings whilst he lived, and I sat at his bedside when he died. Before his soul left him I asked if he had any wish, and he commanded me to attend his body after death to make certain that it be found and returned to the holy soil. So he died. Lest the saintly man be put into foreign soil, they buried him in the middle of the waters of the river."

Moses lifted the old woman in his arms and carried her out of the house, walking whereunto she pointed. The elders followed him, and so did many other people, Jews and Egyptians alike. In the shallow waters of the Nile they found the body of Joseph the Righteous and carried him on their shoulders back to the camp of the Hebrews. When Moses lowered his head, he saw that the old woman in his arms was dead. Then they took up the bodies of Joseph and his servant for three hundred years and more and carried them both from Egypt, across the sea and across the desert, to the Promised Land.

THE PRAYER OF GOODNESS

UR PEOPLE have no saints and our holy men are sinful.

This is not a contradiction and it is not a paradox. For our people there is only one God, and only the Lord himself is a perfect being. And while all men are made in His image, which means that even the most dastardly and cruel partake of His grace, so are the most devout and devoted still beset by sin.

As our sages have said: it is not freedom from sin, but, rather, the determination to fight for goodness that bespeaks depth of faith. And goodness is possible only in the relationship of man to fellowman. Faith rests not so much in mastery over one's desires, but in deeds of goodness to one's fellows. Some of the greatest evildoers of the past and present have led ascetic lives; many of those who have drained the full beaker of life's pleasures have brought happiness to everyone.

The Book has it that in ancient years the prophet Isaiah visited a poor widow whose son was desperately ill. The holy man fell to his knees and prayed for the recovery of the boy; and the boy got well. Some days later the widow, troubled, came to the prophet.

"Tell me, O Master," she said. "I prayed for my son's deliverance for days and days and the Lord did not listen. Yet you prayed and He harkened. Why?"

The prophet replied: "The prayer for oneself, a prayer for one's own, never reaches heaven. Only prayers for a fellowman will find a listening God."

THE PALMS OF SUKKOTH

TO ISAIAH there came a young man who said, "Master, tell me, what is the heart of faith?"

And the prophet answered, "The heart of faith —faith at its deepest depth—is hidden, but it is always there. You may see it anywhere in creation, and when you do, you will see the hand of the Lord pointing it out."

This was a serious young man. He went earnestly about the task of finding the heart of all faith. He watched people build a bridge across the river, admiring the help they gave one another. But soon afterwards he saw the same people fall into open conflict. He watched a beehive and an anthill—these creatures did not fight among themselves but sooner or later they turned to their own use what had first appeared to be deeds devoted to others. The young man wandered for a year and a day, from town to forest and from the brook to

the sea, but he saw not the hand of the Lord.

On the day he had determined would be the last of his journey, the sun was hot and the path was dusty, and he lay down at the edge of the desert under a palm tree. As he bent down to place his coat on the ground, he saw some tiny shoots coming up. He stretched out and looked up into the sky, and there above him it seemed as though the branches of the palm tree had spread out to cover with their shade the little sprouts. For a moment it appeared to the young man that the tree itself was the hand of God and he understood the meaning of the words of the master: "The heart of all faith is goodness to a fellow creature, and that goodness alone."

From that day on, as you all know, the branch of the palm tree has been, and still is, an everlasting symbol of goodwill towards man.

LOVE FOR ALL MEN

T IS TOLD of Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph, who lived and died in the years of Israel's last revolt against the Roman oppressors, that he was in the habit of reciting his blessings three times. His enemies, of whom there were a few, ridiculed him by declaring that the last two prayers must be for his pagan ancestors, because Rabbi Akiba, who was the greatest of the *tannaim* and the veritable founder of the Talmud, was not born a Jew; he became one at the age of forty. One day one of the sophisticates asked the rabbi the why and wherefore of his three blessings.

Rabbi Akiba replied: "The first I ask for my family and myself, the second for my friends and my people, and the third for my enemies."

"Why should you wish to bless your enemies?" asked the scoffer. "Your enemies wish to destroy you. Why should you want to sustain them?"

Rabbi Akiba answered, "Man's fate is deter-

mined by many things. All things are in God and God may have ordained that your friends harm you as well as that your enemies uplift you.

"When I was a boy I lived with my father in the hills of Samaria. I was herding my father's sheep and tending his camels, and often did I have to wander far for pasture and water.

"There was a neighbor of our land who embittered my days by stoning stray sheep and dirtying the water from which our camels drank. No plea of my father, no tears of my mother, nor my own entreaties could stop this man from his evil deeds.

"We suffered for many, many years, and when my parents died I left my land and cattle, for I could bear it no longer. I took work with a Hebrew, Kalba Sabua, near the great city of Jerusalem. And there is where I met the love of my life, the daughter of that man, and through her I met the Lord of my life, by whose divine guidance I live so full an existence.

"I hear His voice in my heart and His commandments in my soul. In the teaching of His Torah I spend my days, and in the study of His Torah I spend my nights. And all this happiness of serving in His grace I owe, not to a friend, and not to a stranger, but to an enemy full of evil intent.

"I do bless that enemy, for he is a great spoke in the wheel of my life, and I love him for that."

And Rabbi Akiba concluded, "Love thy neighbor, as he is like you; and love thy neighbor, as he is in God, as are we all."

The sophisticate asked no more questions that day.

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